[Dr Ayesha Razzaque](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-ayesha-razzaque)

December 16, 2020

**A colossal learning setback**

The writer is an independent education researcher and consultant. She has a PhD in Education from Michigan State University.

Since the pandemic began, educators have been warning about the possibility of a backslide in student learning. As we enter December, studies from around the world have started to pour in confirming this. The Washington Post reported on a study conducted in the US by McKinsey & Co, warning of a ‘lost generation’. Assessments conducted to see where students stand have shown that student learning levels have been set back by months.

These setbacks have not been evenly distributed either, affecting students from poorer households and students of color more severely. While white students’ progress was set back by three months, students of colour were set back by five months. Subject-wise, learning losses have been most severe in mathematics. Learning setbacks are also less substantial for children who had quiet areas to study at home, had parental support, computers and a high-speed Internet connection.

In Kazakhstan, students showed a learning loss of 11 percent after a three-month closure. In the UK, secondary students showed a learning loss equivalent to 22 months when tested on writing. Early data out of Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands tell similar stories. The consensus is that children from disadvantaged backgrounds experience greater losses and that educational inequality is on the rise.

A recent household phone survey in Pakistan confirms that the effects of learning from home during school closures varied with household characteristics. Children from wealthier households were much more likely and able to continue learning from home, while children from poorer households were at a distinct disadvantage – they have less access to guidance from educated people in the home to support them and their access to distance learning initiatives (eg, government-led television programming) was also limited. These children will come back to school behind their peers from wealthier households, having not only learned less during closures but likely having forgotten what they had learned prior to closures.

The McKinsey study and several others released recently are confirming what educators instinctively knew would happen and what we have been hearing about anecdotally: the hurried shift to online classes in the spring, which improved only marginally in the fall, has caused many students to academically disengage. This is reflected in the greater number of failing grades last year and the drop in college admissions applications overall, and a larger drop among disadvantaged student groups.

The effects of school closures, extended summer and winter vacations in Pakistan, are now coming into focus. Learning poverty, defined as the inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10, currently stands at 53 percent in low- and middle-income countries. In Pakistan, according to government data, that figure stood at 75 percent before Covid-19. A new World Bank report estimates that learning poverty in Pakistan has now inched up to 79 percent as a result of school closures.

As long as this pandemic continues, the decision to reopen schools is a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t one. Florida has been aggressive in keeping schools open and is seeing a greater number of infections among students and staff. El Paso, Texas, is taking a more cautious, data-driven approach that considers infection rates to allow limited in-person teaching but has to contend with the shortcomings of online classes.

The good news is, we think we know what to do and what will likely work once schools reopen – remedial classes to address learning losses, before they accrue too much. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) is a multi-country research programme that covers research on what works in education in a number of different contexts. Its synthesis of research related to Covid-19 induced learning losses emphasizes that any solution to mitigate those losses will have to be broken down into three core components – assessing how much children know when they return to school, sorting them by learning level, and tailoring teaching to each level.

In terms of resources, this requires adapting curriculum for remedial education, providing additional teacher development support and top-to-bottom monitoring. Best of all, it has already been piloted in many developing countries and proven effective in several Indian states and African nations.

While students in many other countries at least had online classes of some kind, a survey conducted in Pakistan during the summer showed that only six percent of students continued to study at home while schools remained closed for 26 weeks. The effects of such a prolonged absence from school should be understood in the context of another study conducted by Andrabi, Daniels and Das in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquake. That event resulted in school closures of only 14 weeks but set back students’ learning by 1.5 to 2 years and reduced their lifetime earnings by 15 percent.

We now have evidence in the form of local and global studies of a slow-moving crisis of unignorable magnitude. We also have a candidate solution that has proven effective on a small scale. What course have our education departments decided to take?

The Ministry of Education and Professional Training is working with the Centre for Economic Research Pakistan (CERP) on a solution following the diagnose, sort, and instruct approach laid down above (Full disclosure: I am currently working with CERP, but this writing reflects only my personal views). The ministry is following the globally accepted approach of establishing efficacy of an intervention by conducting an experiment before possibly scaling to all schools under its jurisdiction, the Islamabad Capital Territory. Beyond that, it is up to provincial education departments to decide what approach to take.

The 1970 cold-war era sci-fi film ‘Colossus – The Forbin Project’ is about an artificially intelligent supercomputer, Colossus, built for a singular mission: to prevent war and keep the world safe from nuclear annihilation. Halfway into the film, Colossus figures out that humans cannot be trusted. In pursuit of its programmed mission, it ends up taking over control of the world without regard for the cost of all freedoms.

Colossus’ single-minded pursuit is mirrored, at least for now, in the approaches being considered by some education departments – the rush to complete the academic year’s syllabus and conduct final exams at all cost. Remediation of lost learning and catching students up have taken a back seat. All credible research on this problem so far tells us that completion of the syllabus, unconditional adherence to a final exam schedule, and the assumption that all will revert to normal from September 2021 onwards are the wrong things to focus on.

At the federal level, the Ministry of Education is signaling an acknowledgment of the colossal problem and its long-term ramifications and awareness of global best practices to deal with it. However, in provinces (where most students are), education departments are still only thinking as far as condensed syllabi, promotion on the basis of homework for lower grades, and possibly delaying exams by a couple of months, while sidestepping the real need for remediation.

In the Inter-Provincial Ministerial Conference, discussions about senior school grades are boxed in by assumptions of inflexible university admissions processes and timelines. In a year where even Ivy League universities have decided to forego and modify their admission requirements, Pakistani universities too will have to adapt. Countries around the world are already questioning the efficacy of holding school exams as usual. Unfortunately, no one has a better alternative to the traditional ‘test’, yet there is growing consensus that exams will have to be made more fair next year. Solutions under consideration range from making exams easier, to boosting grades of disadvantaged children, to combining exam scores with more subjective scoring through the year, and so forth.

This is a challenging time that requires sharp focus on the core problem – learning losses, smart planning ‘now now’ (in South Africa people say ‘now’ twice to show urgency because otherwise ‘now’ may never come), and funds to support hiring temporary teachers in understaffed schools.

We have to keep reminding ourselves that these learning losses will not disappear over time. There is undisputed evidence that the negative effects accrued at an early-stage compound over time and result in lifelong economic losses. Therefore, investment in an early recovery solution is the only smart thing to do.